

-Disability Claims Modernization Act Passed House Unanimously; Clinton and Hall Urge Senate Approval Before Congress Adjourns-

-Would Cut Backlog of Nearly One Million Disabled Vets Waiting for Earned Benefits-

Cortlandt Manor, NY – Standing with veterans today, U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) and U.S. Rep. John Hall (D-NY19) announced that they will make a major push to pass a groundbreaking veterans' benefits bill through Congress this week.

The House version of the legislation (H.R. 5892) passed the House by a unanimous vote of 429 to 0 on July 30th. It was written by Hall, who is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, after extensive hearings. The Senate version was introduced by Senator Clinton and Senator Charles E. Schumer (D-NY). The House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees are working to hammer out final veterans' legislation for this Congress, which is scheduled to adjourn for the year on Friday. The disability claims measure is one of a number of veterans' bills still pending.

"In a time when we are asking so much of our men and women in uniform, it is unacceptable they are often burdened by excessive delays, bureaucratic obstacles and the outdated rules of the VA claims process when they return home. We owe our veterans a debt of gratitude, and we can start by taking steps to streamline the VA system so that we are delivering benefits quickly and fairly to our heroes and their families," said Senator Clinton.

"As chairman of the disability assistance subcommittee, I have made overhauling the broken disability claims process a top priority," said Hall. "It's a disgrace that veterans have to wait months or years for the benefits they have earned because of a bureaucracy that simply doesn't work. Senator Clinton and I are fighting to the final days so veterans won't have to keep waiting while the VA stalls their claims."

This Congress has passed more legislation to assist veterans than any other Congress in recent memory, including the largest increase in funding for health care in 77 years, and a new GI Bill to help pay for a college education for veterans.

However, until the Veterans Administration's claims benefit system is overhauled – as the Hall-Clinton bill will do – disabled veterans are often forced to wait months and even years for the benefits they rightly deserve. More than 830,000 claims from disabled veterans were backlogged at the Veterans Administration last year, and that number is expected to top one million claims in 2009 without drastic reform.

Clinton and Hall were joined by representatives from the American Legion, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and other veterans' organizations and local residents, Harriet Wolf and Ed Gettler, whose backlogged claims were resolved by Rep. Hall. Hall's office has

obtained more than \$630,000 in overdue payments for veterans in his district in his first term.

Harriet Wolf of Pomona can attest to the need to reform the VA's disability claims process. Mrs. Wolf's late husband, Ted, was exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and later developed prostate cancer as a result. Initially rated by the VA as 40% disabled by this ailment, Mr. Wolf's cancer grew progressively worse and he was forced to re-file his disability claim in August of 2006 – only to see his claim indefinitely backlogged.

"When he was at his weakest point, he was told by the VA that they would be unable to review his claim for close to a year. He knew he didn't have a year to live and was outraged that our soldiers today would come back needing benefits and services that would be greatly delayed," Mrs. Wolf said of her husband.

Mr. Wolf reached out to Congressman Hall's office in January of 2007 who then contacted the VA on his behalf. Within a month, Mr. Wolf received word that he would be receiving a 100% disability rating, a five-fold increase in his monthly benefits and a retroactive check for over \$17,000. "Thanks to the support of Congressman John Hall and the tireless efforts of his staff, in the last few months of his life, my husband was able to receive his true veteran's benefits," Mrs. Wolf added.

The disability claims legislation sponsored by Clinton and Hall targets specific changes in claims processing that must be put in place to make the system work, in what would be on the most significant changes in the history of the Veterans Administration.

The bill, H.R. 5892, as passed by the House would make these changes:

- In today's VA, a veteran's claim is often held up until every medical condition is evaluated, an average wait over six months. Under this bill, a severe, undisputed injury – such as a lost leg or arm – will be compensated immediately. Lesser injuries that take more time to evaluate will be handled separately.
- Today's VA claims processing system is labor intensive and paper based, with the loss of paper files a major cause of delays. This bill brings the VA into the 21st century by requiring use of modern information technology.
- The VA also relies on outdated medical concepts and an archaic rating schedule. This bill updates the definitions of specific diseases and disorders to bring them in line with current medical knowledge, and takes a comprehensive approach to disability ratings, including factors such as loss of quality of life and future earnings capacity.
- Today when a claim is being considered, a surviving wife or child of a veteran dies to start all over again at square one – even if that claim has been stuck in the backlog for years. This bill allows the spouse or child to step into the shoes of the veteran while the claim continues, saving them months or years of frustration and waiting.
- The bill recognizes the rights and needs of family members by establishing a new unit called the "Survivors' Office." The VA has always proclaimed as part of its mission caring for the widows and orphans of veterans, but has never had an office specifically focused on them.
- Another title of the bill streamlines cases before the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to reduce delays.

"Right now, too many wounded veterans are going broke while waiting for their claims to be processed. The VA is caring for 21st century veterans with 20th century standards and technology. By making desperately needed improvements to the system, we can ensure that those who have sacrificed for our nation are not left waiting for their benefits," said Paul Rieckhoff, Executive Director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). "IAVA is grateful to Senator Clinton and Congressman Hall for their commitment to overhauling the VA benefits claims system."

"A nimble, responsive VA claims system could go a long way to help our nation live up to its commitment to care for wounded veterans and their families," said Hall. "It could help prevent suicides, bankruptcies, poverty, family disruptions, and homelessness among our nation's disabled veterans. We can and must change the way Washington handles the claims of our injured veterans. Congress and the President must act now."

"Patriotism is not just supporting our troops when they are deployed overseas, it also means living up to our nation's promise to honor their service when they return to civilian life," said Senator Clinton. "Overhauling the VA benefit system is a task that is long overdue, and these changes are critical to ensuring that our veterans are not forced to wait for essential benefits like healthcare, pensions, and vocational rehabilitation. I will continue to work with my colleagues in the Senate to pass this legislation so that our wounded veterans and their families do not have to wait for the benefits they have earned."